

# Washington DC veterans and residents speak out against privatization of VA health care

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Over the past month, it has come to light that the Department of Veterans Affairs has been hiding the figures on the prolonged wait times for veterans seeking medical care at VA-sponsored medical facilities. The wait times have led to dozens of unnecessary deaths, as well as exacerbated health problems that could have been opportunely treated or prevented.

The scandal first broke in an interview on CNN featuring Dr. Sam Foote, a retired physician who worked for a Phoenix hospital for 24 years, after which numerous leaks from other whistleblowers were released to the public.

The scandal escalated to the point that the head of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Eric Shinseki, was forced to resign amid public outrage that was sparked upon the release of further details exposing similar practices in other clinics nationwide.

The mainstream media, for its part, has chosen to focus on the calls for privatization of the VA health care system, with both Republicans and Democrats calling for massive “reforms” under the guise of accountability. In reality, these politicians have jumped at the opportunity this scandal has brought them to further dismantle the American health care system in the drive for profit.

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed residents and veterans at the Community Clinic Southeast, which serves veterans in the southeast Washington DC neighborhood of Anacostia. Once the residence of Frederick Douglass, the African-American orator and abolitionist, the historic neighborhood—part of the larger Ward 8—today is characterized by intense social inequality and a nearly 50 percent rate of child poverty.

Reporters found that despite outrage concerning the

unnecessary wait times imposed on veterans, there was overwhelming hostility to the calls for privatization. Workers and veterans also expressed hostility to the US government as a whole.

“I think that it is a crime that the government isn’t doing enough to take care of the men and women who put their lives on the line for this country,” said Felita, a local resident who had worked with disabled Air Force veterans in the past. When asked what she thought the attitude of the ruling elite was toward veterans, she responded, “They don’t care about veterans.” A passerby interjected, “If they can do this to the troops then they can do this to anybody.”

In regards to the privatization of the health care system, Felita expressed her disagreement. Speaking about her time working with disabled veterans, she explained, “These men deserve the best, and I fell in love with them after working with them because they were so nice.”

Steve, a veteran of the Vietnam War, spoke to reporters after receiving care at the clinic. He mentioned that he had been forced to wait for years to receive treatment for a back ailment. When reporters mentioned that the VA had been established in the wake of a massive march on Washington DC, Steve recalled how the Bonus Army, a movement of WWI veterans who had been denied their promised military bonuses, had been camped in Anacostia, where the VA clinic was located.

K.D., another resident in the area, who had family in the military and experienced base life firsthand, took the opportunity to speak out against the political establishment. He stated, “President Obama is a puppet, and Congress and the Senate already knew what was going on.” That sentiment was echoed by several interviewees that day.

A young man named Eric asserted full agreement with the WSWS perspective. He said, “They [the government] treat you well while you’re in the military, but once you’re out, they don’t care.” When reporters mentioned that health care is a social right, Eric responded, “I totally agree.” He then said that he wished to attend any meetings that the Socialist Equality Party would hold in the future.

Marc, another resident, spoke on his experience, “They should not privatize the system. My uncle is not getting proper care. I have another friend who is a 56-year-old veteran, and he can’t get the housing he was promised. It’s not just health care. Other veterans in my family aren’t getting what they were promised either.” Marc agreed with the position that health care is a social right that workers should not be forced to pay for.



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